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# THE VISION OF GETTYSBURG

(1863-1913)

BY ROBERT UNDERWOOD JOHNSON

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## I

WHAT if, that day, when on those tawny slopes,  
Made as by Mars for battle, but till then  
Still happily unhistoric, steeped in peace,  
Two foes, of age-long enmity, drew near—  
(Foes of torn forest and of trampled field,  
Not in the smart apparel of parade  
But long bedraggled with the toil of war,  
Will matched with will, courage to courage set,  
In tremulous expectancy of fate,  
Each with the hopes of millions in reserve);—

What if, while strong men nearer to their hearts  
Pressed their worn amulets: a wisp of hair;  
A woman's tear-stained letters; some small toy;  
The penciled tracing of a baby's hand;  
Likeness of child by father never seen,  
To whom that father was to be a myth  
Told by a lonely fireside through the years;—

What if, at that weak moment of the brave,  
Before the sign of serried death was given,  
The Angel of the Future, in a white dream  
Of morning mist that blotted out the scene,  
Had swept in solemn beauty down the lines,  
Trailing a scroll of visioned prophecy,  
Till all had seen that field with second sight,  
And all had heard her words:

“ O warriors, stay!

Unshot be the cannon, sheathed the sword.  
Look on this picture, half a century hence,  
When ye, the tottering remnants who shall live  
To mourn the comrades who to-day shall die,  
Shall be again the brothers ye are now  
But seem not now to be. Look close!  
Who are those old who mimic the assault  
Ye face to-day, crossing this very ground  
To meet not Death but Love? See, clasped in peace,  
Not clenched, your hands. Those heads of gray are yours.  
Time has outwept the colors of your flags,  
The strife forgiven, all the hate forgot.  
Sires of the not-yet-orphaned, will ye die?”

With such a vision, slowly fading back  
From dream to dread, from dread to dream again,  
Could one have given the awful word of death,  
Or human hearts obeyed it?

Yes, ah yes!

In all great enterprises of the soul  
The immediate duty is the strongest lure.  
Not lightly did these follow the red trail,  
Not for adventure, not for murderous sport,  
Nor glory, oft more sordid than grosser gain;  
But for the stark necessity of Man  
To heed his conscience' trumpet, lest he die  
And live on, dead! So,—that the God within,  
Who haunts our coward days, might be appeased,—  
With war's momentum in their heated veins,  
And with a Hebrew prophet's certainty,  
Each called on Heaven for justice, and rushed on!

## II

We say they fought each for the Right he saw.  
There is but one good greater than the Right—  
The imperishable Love of Right. That stays,  
The needle of our destiny, howe'er  
Its sensient tremblings momentarily may swerve.  
God of the storm, the fog, the sinking sea,  
Be praised for that deliverance!

And yet—

What if that strife, which all men said must be,  
Solvent of error, touchstone of respect,  
New bond of strength, *need never to have been?*  
We doubt, but what shall ermined History say?  
Somewhere in every devastating storm  
Of hungry flame that sweeps the night with fear  
Once lurked a primal spark not hard to quench;  
Perchance it smoldered long in soft neglect,  
Till came a breeze, gentle as infant's breath,  
And piled on peril ruin and dismay--  
Ashes for beauty, as though patient years  
Had been withdrawn from Time, to be consumed.  
Of our dire conflagration who shall name  
The careless passer, or the sleeping guard,  
Or those who left the danger to their sons,  
Trusting the futile trench of compromise?  
I name them boldly: the revered, the great,  
Firstlings of fame in every patriot's thought,  
The sculptured saints about the nation's fane,  
Their faults forgotten in a people's pride.

Men of that elder day, who gave us life,  
Honor for what you did, but not, alas!  
For what you left undone. For, when you built  
The nation's temple, hallowing every stone  
With sacrifice, you knew a serpent dwelt  
'Neath its foundations, yet you took your ease  
And left the poison of its brood to spread.  
*On you, on you the blood of Gettysburg!*

### III

For whom these fables? Are they not for us?  
Are there not other serpents that demand  
The firm Herculean grasp? And other fires  
Mad with destructive spirit half subdued?  
Must Wisdom's torch consume a hundred hills  
That it may give us light to see our path  
Into peace-haunted valleys?

Land of ours!

Not less they love thee who must chide the faults

Of those that serve thee. Be thou wise as strong—  
Justice to-day thy fortress of to-morrow;  
Better than battleships thine own Good Will;  
The bond of all thy children Equal Laws,  
Their pride thine Honor. Not unto thyself  
Alone thou livest but to Space and Time!  
Lead thou thy leaders, lead they not aright,  
That, seeing clearly where our fathers failed,  
We leave no legacy of wanton strife  
As bones of prey to tempt the beast in Man,  
Lest, surfeited with carnage, sadder days  
Shall scorn our ashes, and impute to us  
The squandered blood of Gettysburgs to come.

ROBERT UNDERWOOD JOHNSON.